VIVID GLIMPSES OF THE LONDON UNDERWORLD

Remarkable Book by a Police Court Missionary, Which Deals With Life in Terms of Life—Misery, Degradation, Ignorance, Virtues and Industry of the Slum People Described and Remedies Discussed

By HERMAN BERNSTEIN.

LONDON, May 16.

NO man in London knows the life of the underworld of this great city better than Thomas Holmes, and no man has a deeper sympathy with those who fall by the wayside. For upward of a quarter of a century Mr. Holmes has been a police court missionary and his intimate knowledge of what are commonly called the degraded and criminal classes leads him to the conclusion that it is not possible to standardize men.

Mr. Holmes believes that there is no special criminal type. He does not attach any importance to the various schools of psychologists that attempt to lay down rules as to how to detect the criminal by his physical conformation or by the convolutions of his brain. In a talk I had with Mr. Holmes this morning he said that after years of close observation, during which he had formed many friendships with criminals, he had come to the opinion that, physically, he has found no evidence that a criminal type exists.

"In saying this," remarked Mr. Holmes, "I know that I shall run counter to the teachings of a good many people and probably also to public opinion. For the criminal class and the criminal type have been written about so largely and talked about so frequently that the majority of people have come to the conclusion that our criminals come from a particular order of society, and that the poorest; or that there exists a type of people whose physical appearance gives outward and visible signs that proclaim the inward criminal mind.

"I believe both these ideas to be entirely wrong. I was confirmed in my opinion about two years ago when I visited the largest prisons in the United States, for I found there, as I have found in England, a complete absence among prisoners of those physical and facial peculiarities that we are taught to believe differentiate criminals from ordinary citizens."

Mr. Holmes visited the United States in 1910 as a delegate to the Prison Congress, held in Washington, and during his stay in America he studied the conditions of the prisons there. Speaking of American prisons, he said:

"Some of your prisons are much too good and some of them much too bad to be of any use in the way of reforming what is known as the criminal class. As a new country America should have profited by our experiences, but I have seen no evidence of improvements in this direction. In a new land, born in recent years, we would naturally expect that some of the mistakes we have made would be avoided. But you go on blundering there even worse than we do."

In New York Mr. Holmes lived about two weeks on the East Side.

"In New York I have noticed that the line dividing the East Side from the West Side is very distinct," said Mr. Holmes. "Fifth avenue divides it. The lower East Side is in certain respects even worse than the East End of London with all its filth and squalor, for there you have practically no playgrounds for the children.

"But New York has a physical advantage over London. Being surrounded by water New York has more fresh air, and though things appeared to me to be in quite bad shape in the congested quarters of New York, I think the fresh air will save them."

Of the Jewish population in the East End of London Mr. Holmes said:

"I want to register a protest against the assumption that an influx of a Jewish population here means crime and poverty. In all my experience as a police court missionary for twenty-five years very few of the Jewish race came into my sphere of influence, and in my work of course there is no such thing as difference of race or creed. I consider their comparative freedom from crime and their very small demand upon charitable institutions most remarkable."

Our conversation turned to the woman's movement in England. Mr. Holmes said:

"Personally I am in favor of votes for women, but I do not think that the general condition of women will be much improved by the suffrage. In the course of my experience I have observed that women are harder on women than men are, they are more severe in their judgment of women, and they think they can size up other women more accurately than men; but they show less sympathy for the so-called degraded women. We have been working for fifteen years to help, as far as possible, the unfortunate women in London; we have been writing and holding meetings, we have established various institutions for that purpose, and yet we have received no assistance or even sympathy from the women who are interested in the movement for equal rights for women.

"I fear that when women attain equal rights they will for a long time to come be handicapped by their excessive love of royalty and the aristocracy, by the glamour of rank and by the influence of the clergy upon them."

Mr. Holmes has just published a work on "London's Underworld." It is an impassioned account of his experiences among the poor and the degraded, it is Dante's "Inferno" brought up to date in a work more fascinating than any novel of to-day, for it deals with life in terms of life. Mr. Holmes has seen the underworld with open eyes and he now depicts it with great sympathy. He tells of the comedies and the tragedies, the vices and the virtues, and the heroisms of the underworld as they passed before him during the past cessive love of royalty and the aristoc- twenty-five years. Extracts follow:

The odds and ends of humanity, so plentiful in London's great city, have for many years largely constituted my circle of friends and acquaintances.

They are strange people, for each of them is, or was, possessed of some dominating vice, passion, whim or weakness which made him incapable of fulfilling the ordinary duties of respectable citizenship.

They had all descended from the Upper World, to live out strange lives or die early deaths in the mysterious, but all pervading world below the line.

Some of them I saw as it were for a moment only; suddenly out of the darkness they burst upon me; suddenly the darkness again received them out of my sight.

But our acquaintance was of sufficient duration to allow me to acquire some knowledge and to gain some experience of lives more than strange and of characters far removed from the ordinary.

But over one and all of my friends hung a great mystery, a mystery that always puzzled and sometimes paralyzed me, a mystery that always set me to thinking.

Now many of my friends were decent and goodhearted fellows; yet they were outcasts. Others were intelligent, clever and even industrious, quite capable of holding their own with respectable men, still they were helpless.

Others were fastidiously honest in some things, yet they were persistent rogues who could not see the wrong or folly of dishonesty; many of them were clearheaded in ninety-nine directions, but in the hundredth they were muddled, if not mentally blind.

Others had known and appreciated the comforts of refined life, yet they were happy and content amid the horror and dirt of a common lodging house! Why was it that these fellows failed and were content to fail in life?

What is that little undiscovered something that determines their lives and drives them from respectable society?

What compensations do they get for all the suffering and privations they undergo? I don't know! I wish that I did! But these things I have never been able to discover.

I am persuaded that weakness is more disastrous to the world than absolute wickedness, for nothing in the whole of my life's experience has taken more out of me and given me so much heart breaking disappointment as my continued efforts on behalf of really well intentioned individuals who could not stand alone owing to their lack of grit and moral backbone. For redemptive purposes I would rather have to deal with a big sinner than with a human jellyfish, a flabby man who does no great wrong, but on the other hand does not the slightest good.

Drunkenness, debauchery, crime and ignorance are never absent in London's great underworld, and in it men and women grown old in sin and crime spend their last evil days. The whining voice of the professional mendicant is ever heard in its streets, for its poverty stricken inhabitants readily respond to every appeal for help.

So it is full of contrasts; for everlasting toil goes on, and the hum of industry ever resounds. Magnificent self-reliance is continually exhibited and self-denial of no mean order is the rule.

The prattle of little children and the voice of maternal love make sweet music in its doleful streets, and glorious devotion dignifies and illumines the poorest homes.

But out of the purlieus of this netherworld strange beings issue when the shades of evening fall.

Men whose hands are against every man come forth to deeds of crime, like beasts to seek their prey! Women, fearsome creatures, whose steps lead down to hell, to seek their male companions.

The people of the underworld are not squeamish; they talk freely, and as a matter of course about life and death. Their children are at an early age made acquainted with both mysteries; a dead child and one newly born sometimes occupy a room with other children.

People tell me of the idleness of the underworld, and there is plenty of it; but what astonishes me is the wonderful, the persistent but almost unwearied toil that is unceasingly going on, in which even infants share.

In this Bastile the passages are very narrow, and our shoulders sometimes rub the slimy moisture from the walls. On every landing in the semi-darkness we perceive galleries running to right and to left. On the little balconies, one on every floor, children born in this Bastile are gasping for air through iron bars.

There are three hundred suites of box rooms in this Bastile, which means that three hundred families live like ants in it. Let us enter No. 250. Time, 3:30 P. M. Here lives a blind matchbox maker and his wife with their seven children. The father has gone to take seven gross of boxes to the factory, for the mother cannot easily climb up and down the stone stairs of the Bastile. So she sits everlastingly at the boxes; the beds are covered with them, the floor is covered with them and the air is thick with unpleasant moisture.

One, two, three, four, there they go over her shoulder to the bed or floor; on the other side of the table sits a child of 4 who, with all the apathy of an adult if not with equal celerity, gums or pastes the labels for his mother. The work must be "got in," and the child has been kept at home to take his share in the family toil.

In this Bastile the children of the underworld live and die, for death reaps here his richest harvest. Never mind, the funeral of one child is only a pageant for others. Here women work and starve, and here childhood, glorious childhood, is withered and stricken; but here too the wicked, the vile, the outcast and the thief find sanctuary.

The strange mixture of it all bewilders me, fascinates me, horrifies me, and yet sometimes it encourages me and almost inspires me. For I see that suffering humanity possesses in no mean degree those three great qualities, patience, fortitude and endurance.

I suppose that if the four children, all over eight years of age, belonging to a widow machinist well known to me, had died their death would have been attributed to "natural causes." She had dined them upon one pennyworth of stewed tapioca without either sugar or milk. Sometimes the children had returned to school without even that insult to their craving stomachs. But "natural causes" is the euphonious name given by intelligent juries to starvation when inquests are held in the underworld.

Herein is a mystery; in the land of plenty, whose granaries, depots, warehouses are full to repletion, and whose countless ships are traversing every ocean, bringing the food and fruits of the earth to its shores, starvation is held to be a natural cause of death.

The more I know of these women and their circumstances the more and still more I am amazed. How they manage to live at all is a puzzle, but they do live and hang on to life like grim death itself. I believe I should long for death were I placed under similar conditions to those my underworld friends sustain without much complaining.

Look again; here is a shabby genteel man who lives by his wits. He is fairly educated and can write a plausible letter. He is dangerous; his stock in trade comprises local directories, "Who's Who," annual reports of charitable societies, clergymen's lists, &c. He is a begging letter writer and moves from lodging house to lodging house; he writes letters for any of the inmates who have some particular tale of woe to unfold or some urgent appeal to make, and he receives the major part of the resultant charity. He is drunken and bestial; he is a parasite of the worst description, for he preys alike on the benevolent and upon the poor wretches whose cause he espouses.

He assumes many names, he changes his addresses adroitly and ticks off very carefully the names and addresses of people he has defrauded. In fact he is so clever and slippery that the police and the Charity Organization Society cannot locate him. So he thrives, a type of many, for every one of London's common lodging houses can provide us with one or more such cunning rogues.

I am told that there are 400 large common lodging houses in London, many of them capable of holding several hundred lodgers, which night after night are filled with a weird collection of humanity, and they cast a fatal spell upon all who get accustomed to them.

Few, very few, who have become acclimatized ever go back to settled home life; for the decencies, amenities and restraints of citizenship become distasteful. And truly there is much excitement in the life, for excitement at any rate abounds in common lodging houses.

I am an Englishman. I love liberty. I must be free or die! I want to order my own life, to control my own actions, to run on my own lines; I would that all men should have similar rights. But alas! it cannot be. Civilization claims and enchains us; we have to submit to its discipline, and it is well that it should be so. We do not, cannot live to ourselves and for ourselves. Those days have long passed and forever. Orderly life and regular duties are good for us and necessary for the well being of the nation.

The more this host increases the weaker the nation becomes, and its existence may ultimately become, not a sign of freedom but a proof of national decay. For parasites thrive on weakly life, be it individual or national. So while we have a profound pity for the nomads let us express it with a strong hand. They cannot care for themselves in any decent way. Let us care for them and detain them in places that will allow permanent detention and segregation. And the results will be surprising, for prisons will be less numerous, workhouses, casual wards and asylums less necessary, lazar houses with their pestilential breath will pass away and England will be happier, sweeter and more free.

The women of the underworld may be divided into three great classes: those who by reason of their habits or mental peculiarities prefer to live homeless lives. Secondly, those whom misfortune has deprived of settled home life. Thirdly those who, having settled homes, live at starvation point.

Should I be asked about the birth and parentage of these women I reply that they come from all classes. Born of tramps and of decent citizens, born in the slums and sometimes in villas, almost every rank and station contributes its quota to this class of wild, hopeless women.

But I pass on to the second class, those who by misfortune have become submerged. This too is a large class, and a class more worthy of sympathy and consideration than the others, for among them, in spite of misfortune and poverty, there is a great deal of womanliness and self-respect, misfortune, ill health, sorrow, loss of money, position or friends; circumstances over which they have had but little or no control have condemned them to live in the underworld. Such women present a pitiful sight and a difficult problem. They cling to the relics of their respectability with a passionate devotion, and they wait, hope, starve and despair.

Now with Dante we are walking in hell; see, there is a form, half human and half animal, creeping toward us with lewd look and suggestion. Yonder is an old hag fearful to look upon. Here a group of cast off wives, whom the law has allowed outraged husbands to consign to this perdition; but who, when sober enough, come back to the upper world and drag others down to share their fate.

And the idle, the vicious, the lustful and the criminal are here too. But we leave them and get back to the everlasting workers, the sober and virtuous women of whom I have told. What a contrast is here presented! Drunkenness, vice, bestiality and crime! Virtue, industry, honesty and self-respect condemned to live together! But let us look and listen; we hear a voice speaking to us.

I am quite sure that I am voicing the opinion of all who have knowledge of the underworld in which such women are compelled to live when I say that the great want in London and in all our large towns is suitable and well managed lodging houses under municipal control and inspection, where absolute cleanliness and decency can be assured, lodging houses to which women in their hour of sore need may turn with the certainty that their self-respect will not be destroyed. But under the present conditions decent women have no chance of retaining their decency or recovering their standing in social life.

But listen again as we stand in the land of crushed womanhood and starving childhood. We hear a gentle voice:

"Mother, it is nearly 1 o'clock, the men have gone by from the public house; you go to bed, dear, and I will finish the work."

A feeble woman, with every nerve broken, rises from her machine, shakes her dress and lies down on her bed, but her daughter sits on and on.

Oh, the sighs and groans and accents of sorrow that come upon our listening ears! Oh, the weariness, the utter weariness of this land below the line!

Midnight, and thousands of women are working! One o'clock, and thousands are still at it! Two o'clock, the widows are still at work! Thank God, the children are asleep. Three o'clock A. M., the machines cease to rattle and in the land of crushed womanhood there is silence if not peace.

But, who is to pay? Shall we ultimately evolve a people that require no sleep, that cannot sleep if they would? Is crushed womanhood to produce human automatic machines? Or is civilization generally to pay the penalty for all this grinding of human flesh and blood?

It was a hot day in June and in company with a friend who wished to learn something about the lives of the very poor I was visiting in the worst quarter of East London.

As we moved from house to house the thick air of within and the dirt within and without were almost too much for us. The boxlike rooms, the grime of the men, women and children, combined with the filth in the streets and gutters, made us sick and faint. We asked ourselves whether it was possible that anything decent, virtuous or intelligent could live under such conditions?

The place was dignified by the name of a street, although in reality it was a blind alley, for a high wall closed one end of it. It was very narrow, and while infants played in the unclean gutters frowsy women discussed domestic or more exciting matters with women on the opposite side.

They discussed us too as we passed and audibly commented, though not favorably, on our business. I had visited the street scores of times and consequently I was well known. Unfortunately my address was also well known, for every little act of kindness that I ventured to do in that street had been followed by a number of letters from jealous non-recipients.

I venture to say that from every house save one I had received begging or unpleasant letters, for jealousy of each other's benefits was a marked characteristic of that unclean street. As we entered the house from which no letter had been received we heard a woman call to her neighbor, "They are going to see the old shoemaker."

She was correct in her surmise and right glad we were to make the old man's acquaintance; not that he was very old, but then 58 in a London slum may be considered old age. He sat in a Windsor armchair in a very small kitchen; a window at his back revealed that abomination of desolation, a Bethnal Green back yard. He sat as he had sat for years, bent and doubled up, for some kind of paralysis had overtaken him.

He had a fine head and a pointed beard, his thin and weak neck seemed hardly able to bear its heavy burden. He was not over clean and his clothes were, to say the least, shabby. But there he sat, his wife at work to maintain him. We stood, for there was no sitting room for us. Grime, misery and poverty were in evidence.

He told us that his forefathers were Huguenots who fled from France and settled as silk weavers in Spitalfields. He had been apprenticed to boot and shoe making, his particular branch of work having been boots and shoes for actresses and operatic singers; that formerly he had earned good money, but the trade declined as he had grown older and now for some years he had been crippled and unable to work and dependent upon his wife, who was a machinist.

There did not seem much room for imagination and poetry in his home and life, but the following conversation took place:

"It is a very hard life for you sitting month after month on that chair, unable to do anything!"

"It is hard; I do not know what I should do if I could not think."

"Oh, you think, do you? Well, thinking is hard work."

"Not to me; it is my pleasure and occupation."

"What do you think about?"

"All sorts of things; what I have read mostly."

"What have you read?"

"Everything that I could get hold of—novels, poetry, history and travel."

"What novelist do you like best?"

The answer came, prompt and decisive, "Dickens."

"Why?"

"He loved the poor; he shows a greater belief in humanity than Thackeray."

"How do you prove that?"

"Well, take Thackeray's 'Vanity Fair'; it is clever and satirical, but there is only one good character, and he was a fool; but in Dickens you come across character after character that you can't help loving."

"Which of his books do you like best?"

"'A Tale of Two Cities.'"

"Why?"

"Well, because the French Revolution always appeals to me, and secondly because I think the best bit of writing in all his books is the description of Sydney Carton's ride on the tumbrel to the guillotine."

"Have you ever read Carlyle's 'French Revolution'?"

"No."

"I will lend it to you."

"If you do I will read it."

"How about poetry; what poets do you like?"

"The minor poets of 200 years ago, Herrick, Churchill, Shenstone and others."

"Why do you like them?"

"They are so pretty, so easy to under-

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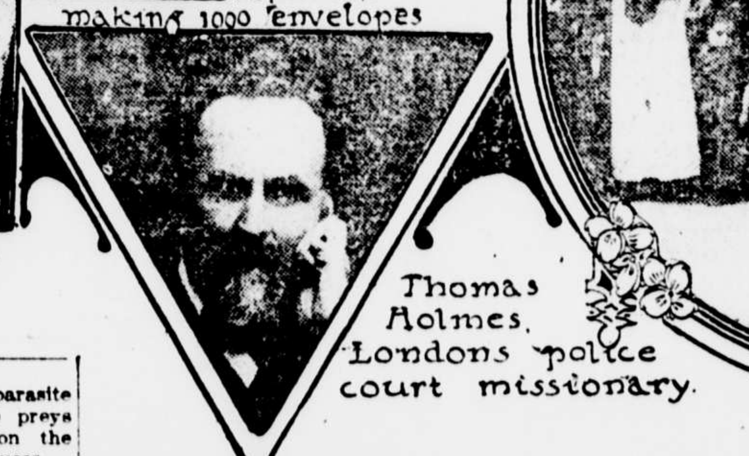
'Down-and-outers' on the Thames Embankment.

Whitechapel.

Penny Soup

Boy minding his baby sister while the mother earns 4½ pence for making 1000 envelopes

Free milk for the baby



Thomas Holmes, Londons police court missionary.

The Poor.